



Chapter 5

*Making the Democratic Process
Work for You*

Participation in Canada's Democracy

Government and our laws can have a big influence on our lives. You may think that government programs need to be changed.

For example, you might think that a certain immigration law is unfair, or you might think a municipal by-law is wrong because it prevents you from doing what you want to do on your own property.

Canada offers you many different opportunities to make government programs and laws respond to your needs.

Voting The first and most obvious way to participate in democratic life is to vote at election time. By voting, you can influence who will represent you in government, and the general nature of new laws and programs.

As a new Canadian citizen you can vote in federal elections, provincial elections and local government elections.



Other Ways to Participate in Democratic Life

Voting is only one way for you to participate in governing our society. Between elections, there will be many opportunities for you as a citizen to influence our society.

In fact, your efforts to influence our laws and government programs between elections are perhaps the most important and effective contribution you can make to Canada's democratic society.

Political parties Many Canadians join a political party. Different political parties have different political philosophies. The largest political parties include the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party of Canada, the New Democratic Party, and the Bloc Québécois. There are many other political parties.

As a member of a political party, you can influence the party's positions on important public issues. To find out more about joining a political party, contact the party directly.

Citizens' groups Many other Canadians choose to participate in democratic life by joining a citizens' group that works on specific issues, such as protecting the environment, reducing government spending and taxes, or fighting poverty. There are thousands of citizens' groups that focus on many issues of public importance.

The focus of this chapter is on participation in democracy through citizens' groups or your own private efforts. Here are some ways you can participate in democratic life:

- ☑ writing to and meeting with your MP or MLA or local government representative
- ☑ starting a citizens' group to work on particular issues
- ☑ organizing or taking part in a public demonstration
- ☑ writing a letter or article to a newspaper that expresses your opinion on an issue of public concern, or distributing information about an issue yourself

The rest of this chapter explains a few of these strategies in more detail, with specific examples of individuals and groups who have used the democratic process to make a difference in our society.

Before you read the remainder of this chapter, make sure you are familiar with Canada's political system, described in Chapter 3.

Finding the Right Strategy

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula for being effective in democratic life. Different strategies may work in different situations. Your choice of a strategy may depend on the size of the changes you wish to make, the degree of controversy an issue creates, or on many other factors. A key to success in democracy is to be flexible: try different strategies and use the ones that work the best.

Experience is valuable but not

necessary If democratic participation is new to you, then you may feel more comfortable by learning from someone who has experience. But you should know that your successful participation in our democracy does not require citizens to have “minimum work experience.”

Educating yourself It is a good idea to educate yourself about the issues that are important in Canada. Read newspapers and news magazines, listen to the news on the radio or watch it on TV, or attend public meetings. By educating yourself, you will be able to make a better choice of who to vote for. You will also likely be more effective in your advocacy.

Freedom to participate One of the most desirable features of living in Canada is that you can participate in democracy without fear. No one in the government, or the police, or another citizen can prevent you from stating your opinions. Other citizens might strongly disagree with you and they may say so. But they cannot prevent you from making your views known.



Educate yourself!

Participation in democratic life can be demanding. Here are some things to consider before you become heavily involved in efforts to reform law and government programs:

- ☑ You will have to put quite a lot of your personal time and energy into the project. This may interfere with your personal life.
- ☑ You may find that the project takes many months or years to complete.
- ☑ You may receive a lot of public attention, which is sometimes negative if people disagree with your viewpoints.
- ☑ Your efforts to make changes may not be successful.

On the positive side, whether or not you are successful, you will likely find that:

- ☑ You have increased the public's knowledge about an important issue, which should improve your chances of making changes.
- ☑ You have made new friends, and gained the respect of people inside and outside your immediate community.
- ☑ You have learned a lot about how democracy and citizen organizations work.
- ☑ You have the personal satisfaction of acting on your beliefs about how your community, province or the country should be governed.

It is up to you to choose how and when you wish to participate in democratic life. Different citizens make different yet equally valuable contributions. You should know that many citizens learn that their participation in democratic life is one of their most rewarding personal experiences.

Organizing for Political Action

Getting public support The more public support you have for your cause, the more likely it is that elected representatives will listen to your concerns. If you find that you are unable to influence public policy on your own, consider seeking more allies who share your opinions.

Look for citizens' groups First, find out whether there is already a group working on the same issue in your community, in your province or elsewhere in Canada. If you find one, the members of that group can advise you how you can help.

Look for other individuals If you don't find such a group, try to contact other citizens who have similar concerns. You could do this by placing an ad in local or community newspapers, searching on the Internet, placing posters in community centres or contacting citizen groups that might be interested in your issue.

It may be useful to establish contact with influential members of your community regarding your concern. You could ask for their advice, for their support, and for the names of other important persons who might support your project.

When you don't find support If you do all this and find little support for your opinion, reconsider your position. Is it worth continuing with your efforts? Controversial issues require a lot of organization and effort. Without this support, you will likely face a long, uphill battle to make any effective change.

One person can still make changes Even so, Canada's history is full of many examples of reform that began with the efforts of a single, dedicated individual. In democracy, one person can make a difference. But you need to be realistic about your chances for success.

One Person Who Made a Difference

Craig Kielburger is a child rights advocate and leadership specialist. He also is an award-winning author and a popular speaker. On February 20, 2007 he was named a Member of the Order of Canada by the Governor General.

When Craig Kielburger was 12 years old he was shocked to learn about the murder of Iqbal Masih, a child labourer turned child rights activist. He established *Free The Children*, a group eager to take action and determined to help free children from poverty, exploitation and powerlessness. The organization began as a small group of classmates in Thornhill, but now has a head office in Toronto and offices around the world.



Under Kielburger's leadership, *Free The Children* and its volunteers have built more than 4,500 primary schools, providing daily education to over 540,000 children.

Convinced of the importance of leadership development in empowering youth, Kielburger co-founded *Leaders Today* in 1999. *Leaders Today* empowers young people through leadership education, providing them with the inspiration and tools to produce positive social change.

The organization delivers local and international training experiences, touching over 350,000 youth every year.

Photo courtesy of *Free the Children*, www.freethechildren.com

Effective Organizing

Successful citizens' groups are well organized. Whether you join an existing group or want to start your own group, it is important that the group operates effectively. Here are some suggestions for organizing a successful group:

Organizing A citizens' group is successful because its members are working on specific activities that will achieve the group's goals. Each member should have a specific job. Someone in the group should have the responsibility to make sure other members are doing their job. The group should choose some members to organize meetings, others to work on publicity and others to do fundraising (collecting money) if the group needs money to pay for its activities.

Meetings Meetings are an important part of every citizens' group. Every group should have a chairperson to facilitate meetings and prepare an agenda (a list of things to be discussed). The chairperson must make sure the meeting is efficient (not too long) and that all members attending the meeting feel comfortable in contributing to the discussion.

Publicity It is important to publicize your group's efforts to reform a law or government program. Not only will publicity attract new members, it will also alert politicians that there is an issue in their community they must respond to. MP's, MLA's and local government representatives are usually more responsive to citizens' concerns when these concerns receive wide media attention.

Public Events Public events help to publicize your group's efforts and raise money. However, they can take a lot of time and planning to do well.

Public Demonstrations

Public demonstrations can be a very effective way to put pressure on the government to do what it does not want to do. The public is more likely to support a demonstration if it is non-violent and the demonstrators do not break the law. Canadians have a long history of using public demonstrations to express their concerns about the government's

conduct and to demand changes. One demonstration will rarely be enough to force the government to change its mind. But public demonstrations can focus a lot of public attention on the group's concerns especially when they are well-timed and properly organized. Successful public protests can force the government to review, and possibly change, its laws or programs.



Using the Media The media can be a citizen group's best friend. The media is very influential in Canada. Reports on TV and radio and newspaper and magazines articles bring your concerns to the attention of other citizens and elected representatives. The media often contact citizen groups to find fresh and interesting subjects for reporting.

Your group should have a plan for working with the media. For example, to effectively communicate a message to the media, many groups choose one or two members to be *spokespersons*. (A spokesperson is someone who speaks on behalf of a group and who makes sure the media know about the group's activities.)

Using Opposition Parties

Opposition parties are also the friends of citizen groups. Their job is to criticize government, so they listen carefully to citizen groups who want to make changes. Your group can use opposition parties to bring your concerns to the attention of the government, the media, and other citizens. Contact a local MLA or MP from an opposition party or approach a senior member of the party directly. As well, opposition parties often have members (known as *opposition critics*) who are directly responsible for responding to issues associated with particular ministries.



Contacting Appropriate Persons

Who to Contact

Contacting the right people will be important to success in making changes to laws and government programs.

Approaching the Government

At some point, even if you have been successful in getting the media or an opposition party interested in your concerns, your group should approach a senior member of the government. Either approach the Minister responsible for the relevant government agency or the Deputy Minister.

You may also wish to approach other Ministers for support who could be valuable allies. On the following pages, this *Handbook* includes more tips about who to contact in government. No matter how much public support you have for your position, you must still convince the government to make the changes.

As a general rule, you should approach an influential person in the government agency who has the authority to recommend changes.

To find out the best person to contact, speak to someone who works in the agency. Or consult someone who is knowledgeable about the agency. You can start by simply contacting the agency by phone (check the blue pages in the phone book) and doing some basic research at your community library or on the Internet.

Usually, the Cabinet Minister or Deputy Minister responsible for the issue has the greatest ability to influence law making and government programs. Unfortunately, it is usually more difficult to arrange to meet with them.

It is often helpful to contact your local MP or MLA. You can bring your concerns to the attention of your MP or MLA either by letter or in a meeting. A meeting with your elected representative is usually much easier to arrange than a meeting with a Cabinet Minister. You may wish to gain the support of your MLA or MP first before approaching the Minister or Deputy Minister. Your MLA or MP may be able to influence the government directly.

For local government issues, it is usually easier to arrange a meeting with local elected representatives.

Whichever government you must deal with, the key to success is to determine who will be most sympathetic to your concerns. Always contact them first. In some cases, you may determine that a member of the civil service will be more sympathetic to your concerns than a politician.

Getting Support for Your Cause

In democracy, certain individuals and organizations are respected for their wisdom and experience. Not everyone always agrees with their opinions, but we tend to listen carefully to what they have to say.

Before you approach the appropriate government official, you should solicit the support of such prominent persons or organizations who agree with your proposals for change. Such support is especially helpful from persons or groups who are not themselves affected by the law or policy. These supporters will be perceived as more independent in their judgement because they have less to gain personally from any changes.

How to Make Contact

Ask for a personal meeting with the government official. To get a personal meeting, you will usually have to send a written request. In your letter, explain what you think is wrong with the law or government program and how you think it should be changed.

Here are some guidelines for writing this letter:

- ☑ First, you must understand the law or program. Get a copy of it. You also need to know how the law or program is applied by the civil service.
- ☑ Keep the tone of the letter formal.
- ☑ Clearly state the principle or value you think is in issue. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of important Canadian values.
- ☑ If you can, supply examples of the undesirable consequences of the law or program.

- ☑ If you can, give examples of other governments that have adopted the approach you recommend.
- ☑ Include any letters of support from others for your request.
- ☑ Finally, ask for a response.

If you are able to arrange a meeting, make sure you notify the government of all the people who will attend. During the meeting, present your arguments politely but firmly for changing the law or government program. When you plan and give your presentation, follow the same guidelines as for writing a letter.

Following Up

Write another letter After a meeting, always write the government official you met with to restate what happened at the meeting. This letter gives both of you the chance to clarify expectations and communication. It also creates a written record of the meeting.

If there is no response It may take some time—even several months—before you receive a response from the government official. If you have had no reply after this time, write a short letter reminding the official of your previous letter or meeting, and ask for a response.

If there is a positive response If the government responds and agrees to change the law or program you deserve congratulations! It is difficult and time consuming to convince government to make changes to laws and programs, so you have done very well.

Write a thank you letter Don't forget to write a letter thanking the official for the positive response, and asking the official to tell you when the change is made. It is one thing for a government to agree to make a change, and another to do it.

Monitoring government action If you do not hear from the government that they made the change, do not hesitate to write again. Keep this up until either the change is made, or you are convinced that nothing is going to be done. Realistically, it takes a long time to *lobby* (to try to persuade government) to make changes.

Most often, it will take more than just one exchange of letters or one meeting to convince the government to make changes.

In some cases, the government will ask the general public for their opinions on whether a law or government program needs to be changed and how it might be changed.

Democratic change can be a slow process Even if the government agrees to make changes, it can take a long time before the changes are made.

Laws can only be made or changed when Parliament, the legislature or local government is in session. This may only occur one or two times during a year.

You will need a lot of patience and perseverance to participate in democratic life.

When Other Strategies Fail

You or your group may not be successful with writing letters, meeting with the government or other strategies. But you continue to believe that a law or government program needs to be changed.

There may be several reasons why the government refuses to change the law or its programs:

- ☑ Other citizens may be pressuring the government not to make changes.
- ☑ Senior civil servants may be advising the government not to make changes.
- ☑ Changes may be against the principles of the governing party and interests of its major supporters.

If you remain committed to change, you may want to try to force the government to do what it does not want to do. The primary way to force the government to make changes is to take the government to court.

Taking the Government to Court

Consider taking the government to court if you have legal advice that the law or program may violate some basic principle of fairness or justice recognized in Canadian law.

Charter challenges For example, a lawyer may advise you that the law or program violates one of the rights guaranteed to all Canadians by the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Under the Canadian legal system, you or your group may be able to ask our courts of law to force the government to honour the basic principle or the *Charter* right.

Drawbacks Going to court is often an expensive, time consuming and frustrating way to change laws or government programs.

Court challenges are expensive because the group will have to hire a lawyer. These court cases can take a long time to prepare and to bring to court. Lawyers charge by the hour. If you lose the case, the court can order your group to pay the government's legal costs as well as your own. The government, on the other hand, has unlimited money to defend a challenge to its laws.

To reduce costs, you should consider seeking sympathetic lawyers to provide their legal services for free or at a reduced price. In addition, the federal government has a pool of money for *Charter* challenges called the *Court Challenges Program*. This

program provides funding to citizens for legal challenges to laws and government programs using the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. To find out more about this program, contact the federal government.

Going to court takes a lot of time and is frustrating for three reasons. First, the courts in Canada are full, and court dates are often set a year or more in advance. Second, you can expect government lawyers to use various legal strategies to delay the case and drain your resources. Finally, even if the group wins at a lower court level, the government will likely appeal the decision to a higher court.

In short, think very carefully about your resources and about the likelihood of winning a court case before deciding to take the government to court.

Making a Difference

Every citizen finds his or her own unique way to contribute to democratic life in our society.

The B.C. Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) and Police Accountability

Police accountability is an important feature in a democracy like Canada.

The police have authority to use force when they detain, arrest and search people. When someone dies or is seriously injured when in the custody of police, the need for police accountability is even greater.

The BCCLA believes that when someone dies in police custody or is seriously injured by police there must be an investigation by an independent person who is not a police officer. Currently, police investigate police in these cases. The BCCLA is concerned that the police will “go easy” on police officers involved in a death or serious injury even if they have made a

mistake or acted unprofessionally. We also believe that the public will not have confidence in police investigations because they will not be seen as fair and independent.

The BCCLA works to change the system for police accountability in death or serious injury cases by:

- ☑ Writing to and meeting with Ministers responsible for the police.
- ☑ Advocating for a review and audit of internal police investigations.
- ☑ Making submissions to and meeting with authorities who review systems for police accountability.

- ✓ Inviting the media and the public to meetings involving influential speakers (like the Ombudsman or people who have had a family member die or be seriously injured by police) who discuss their views of the need to change the system.
- ✓ Distributing press releases and writing articles in newspapers advocating to change the system.
- ✓ Advocating for and participating in judicial inquiries that examine the death of people in the custody of police like Ian Bush (a man who was shot in the back of the head by the RCMP in 2005), Frank Paul (an aboriginal man left in an alley by the Vancouver police in 1998) and Robert Dziekanski (a Polish man who died at Vancouver airport after the RCMP used a taser gun on him).
- ✓ Going to court to make sure police oversight agencies like the Commission for Public

Complaints Against the RCMP do their job.

- ✓ Encouraging the public to write/email/fax the Prime Minister, Premiers and Ministers responsible for the police to change the system.

The police have a significant influence in society. Politicians have resisted making changes to police accountability when there is death or serious injury. Sometimes it can take years to change the law. Advocacy groups must be persistent in their efforts. With time and a good cause, often positive change can be made.



Sylvia Fee, sister of Gerald Chenery, Murray Mollard, Linda Bush, mother of Ian Bush and Dolores Young, mother of Kevin St. Arnaud at the BCCLA Death In-Custody Forum in 2007.

Ethical Purchasing Policies

Many products that used to be made in Canada, the United States and Europe are now made in countries that have much lower pay and poorer working conditions. In recent years, many groups in Canada have become concerned about these lower labour and environmental standards and the effect they have on people. They believe that the products we buy and use in Canada should not contribute to poverty, human rights violations and environmental damage in other countries.

To address these concerns, a broad coalition of groups formed to persuade governments, universities and colleges to adopt ethical purchasing policies that would promote buying products that reflect fair labour and good environmental standards. This coalition included groups like the Maquilla (Spanish word for free trade zone) Action Network, the Canadian

Labour Congress, Oxfam, student organizations, religious groups, and businesses like VanCity Credit Union and Mountain Equipment Co-op. The coalition, called the B.C. Ethical Purchasing Group, met with politicians, held public meetings and produced educational literature on the benefits of ethical purchasing.

In Vancouver, their efforts to promote these policies were initially unsuccessful. Even Vancouver city council led by COPE, a political party usually more sympathetic to these concerns, seemed uninterested.

In the middle of this campaign for change, Vancouver firefighters discovered that their new winter coats came with a label that clearly stated that they were “Made in Burma”. Burma is a country that has been ruled by a military dictatorship for many years. There is no political freedom

and wide abuse of human rights by the government that has brutally suppressed civilian protests by killing and imprisoning thousands of citizens. The governments of many western nations, including Canada, will not trade with or purchase products from Burma.

Upon learning of the Burmese-made coats, the coalition immediately held a press conference that was widely covered by the media. There was so much public attention and outcry that Vancouver city council agreed to set up an ethical purchasing task force that included a broad range of interests including businesses to report and make recommendations to the city.

The task force recommended adoption of the International Labour Organization's eight core Conventions and as a result, the city's Ethical Purchasing Policy and Supplier Code of Conduct were born.

They quickly became a model that other cities in Canada used for their own policies. As it turned out, the adoption of this policy actually saved the city of Vancouver money.

When a new civic government led by the NPA was elected—a party more associated with business interests—city council announced that they would make the policy voluntary rather than mandatory. Members of the coalition joined forces again to pressure city council to keep the policy mandatory.

Just before a city council meeting to discuss the proposed change (many groups and individuals had signed up to speak against the change), city council announced that they would maintain the mandatory policy.

This example provides a good illustration of the effectiveness of advocacy by a coalition of groups. It also shows how it is important to be persistent and how a well-timed press conference can make a difference in changing government policy.

i To view the City of Vancouver's policy, visit http://vancouver.ca/policy_pdf/AF01401P1.pdf

Working for Environmental Protection

Anyone who has taken the ferry to Victoria, B.C. will be familiar with a small body of water known as Tsehum Inlet, just south of the ferry terminal at Swartz Bay on Vancouver Island. It is a place of great natural beauty. It is also important habitat for many eagles, falcons, herons and over 30 species of migratory seabirds and shorebirds.

To protect this habitat, Canada created the Shoal Harbour Sanctuary in 1931 as part of the Migratory Birds Convention, an international agreement to protect birds that migrate across the border between Canada and the United States.

Tsehum Inlet is also a marina for parking boats. A development company planned to add 75 new spaces for boats by digging out the bottom of the lagoon.

This development would have significantly damaged the sensitive environment for the birds protected in the sanctuary. Ignoring the advice of their own Environmental Advisory Commission, the local city council approved the plan.

Local citizens opposed to the marina expansion plan decided to take action to prevent the development. Writing an article in the local newspaper about their concerns, they attracted a large crowd to International Migratory Bird Day at the Inlet.

This event included a tour of the area by celebrated wildlife artist Robert Bateman. The public also gained the support of the Environmental Law Center at the University of Victoria, a public interest organization that assists citizens, community groups and organizations to protect the environment.



At the next city council meeting to approve rezoning of the area for the marina expansion, many citizens attended to voice their disapproval of the plan. A student from the Environmental Law Centre also attended and made a presentation to city council to explain how the plan had not followed the law by obtaining a necessary permit from the provincial government.

As a result of these efforts, city council decided not to approve rezoning the property. The habitat for the bird population was saved.

This example demonstrates how important public awareness about a problem can be to persuading public officials. Through the media, public events, attendance at government meetings and the assistance of an advocacy group, the community was able to make a difference and protect the environment.

Encouraging Participation: Introducing New Canadians to Our Political System

Some new Canadians will not vote in federal, provincial or local government elections. Why not?

Many new Canadians do not understand Canada's political system.

- ☑ They may not know how our system works.
- ☑ They are not familiar with our political parties and what they represent.
- ☑ They don't know the candidates in an election or what they stand for.
- ☑ Perhaps they are still learning English and so find it difficult to get information about our political system.
- ☑ Some people might want to vote but decide not to because they cannot make an informed choice about who to vote for.

- ☑ Finally, some new Canadians come from countries that are not democracies. They may have a great distrust of governments. They may not understand that governments should serve the citizens, not themselves.

When you consider all these obstacles, you can understand why some new Canadians may not vote.

Yet voting is a very important right and responsibility in democracy. Some groups work to encourage new Canadians to vote. For example, an immigrant support group may organize an all-candidates meeting for people who speak Spanish.

The group should advertise the date and location of the meeting in community newspapers and publications that are printed in Spanish.



They should post notices of the meetings at various important locations for the Latin American community. Most importantly, at the meeting itself, they should translate the responses and discussion of the candidates.

These kinds of meetings can be very successful. Many Canadians who speak another language have the opportunity to attend and learn about politics and elections. These citizens may then share this information with their family, friends and co-workers.

Meetings like these make it possible for more people in the non-English speaking community to vote with confidence in elections. There's a good chance they will continue to vote in future elections.